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SUBJECT CIA Involvement in Nicaragua

MAURY POVICH: Welcome, please, Ray Cline, formerly the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency for Intelligence. He is now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University. And Harry Rositzke, station chief in many countries, as well as the head of the division regarding the Soviet Union, served with the CIA for more than 25 years now, and has this new book out called Managing Moscow: Guns or Goods.

Let's start with you, Harry, and the premise. You say your brethren, people you worked with for 25 years, maybe because of the Bay of Pigs experience and others, the CIA should not be running the war on an operational basis.

HARRY ROSITZKE: Well, the only reason for getting CIA in is to have a kind of a cover so that at any time it comes up, the President can say, in effect, this is not an official American operation. In other words, this so-called plausible denial means he can say no without really lying.

POVICH: We are not legitimately in there unless we send in the United States Army.

ROSITZKE: That's right.

So, that has broken down three times. When the U-2 went over, President Eisenhower said, "I did it." When the Bay of Pigs messed up, the President, in effect, said, "I'm responsible." Then it got down to be kind of silly, whereas the Angolan support was debated in Congress. And now we suddenly have the support for the Contras being a matter of discussion in the press, in pulpits, in Congress, and among anybody who's

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interested.

POVICH: And you say, in this big article in the Outlook section of The Post yesterday, that the CIA can serve a purpose there, but an intelligence purpose, in terms of infiltrating various factions and understanding and gathering intelligence and data, so that a policy can be formed.

ROSITZKE: CIA started off as an espionage and counter-espionage service. Over the next five or six years, back then, we got into action.

What I'm suggesting -- and I suggested this or many years, even while I was inside -- let's get back to our real business. America needs a highly competent foreign intelligence service. There are situations all over the place where we don't have enough information. You can say we didn't know what was going on in Grenada. I don't think we know exactly what's going on in Managua now. I'm not sure we had an objective look at how effective the Contras have been. We apparently can't even do as well as the press can on saying, "Look, here's where the next fight's going to be."

POVICH: Ray, what's ~~long~~^{WRONG} with that kind of premise?

RAY CLINE: Well, I think it's a kind of a cop-out, really. Of course we need more intelligence. I agree entirely with Harry. But that's not the issue.

The question is, when someone, as I was 20 years ago, gets some evidence that's very firm, they take it in to the President and said, "Look, here is what the Russians are doing in Cuba," in 1962. "Here are missiles that can hit the United States," somebody has to decide what to do. Now, in that case we decided a blockade, an open blockade, a military action. No problem.

But there are occasions when the United States, for good reasons, does not want to take what essentially is military action. To say that we would take military action in Nicaragua today, I think, is just a cop-out because we really wouldn't do it.

The alternative, over the years, has been for CIA officials -- not the ones who take care of collecting intelligence -- to arrange, to assist local people, not Americans, who have their own motivation for fighting against the regime that is causing the strategic difficulties the United States is confronting. That's when you turn to CIA covert actions.

POVICH: Doesn't this cause a problem, though, in terms

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of image of the CIA, when they take over a military operation, Don? Isn't that when members of Congress start to question as to should it be the CIA, I mean should we be doing all this covertly, in terms of an actual military operation?

DON OBERDORFER: Well, what happened in this case, as Ray sort of suggested, back in 1981, in November of 1981, then-Secretary of State Haig wanted to go in there with a military operation. He wanted, basically, to blockade Cuba and to use American power to tell the Nicaraguans, "Cut it out. We don't like what you're doing. And we're going to put pressure on." The White House and the President rejected that because it seemed to be too dangerous, because they had a domestic program to get through, for whatever reason; and instead decided to do a small-scale, at that time, CIA operation to support a force near Nicaragua, to put pressure on them, beginning with 500 men --that was the initial, 500 men. Then it was a thousand. Then it was two thousand. Then it was five thousand. Now they've got it up to 15 to 18 thousand men all around Nicaragua being supported.

Well, that's no secret anymore, as was said by Harry. They debate it in Congress. The Administration has to ask for the money.

POVICH: But, Rollie, didn't the Administration put a lot of -- maybe make a possible media error by putting all of this on the front burner? In other words, putting Nicaragua on the front burner of foreign policy and El Salvador on the front border, instead of leaving it on the back burner. If you have covert operations, don't you want to hang back and not have this constantly in the press so that it has public attention all the time?

ROWLAND EVANS: Well, I think it's very hard to do that, Maury, because there is a free press in this country. And a lot of people have been going down there, including myself, and I think Don's been down there, and you see what's going on. And you know there is a twilight area, as Ray Cline suggests, in which going to the Congress and asking for a declaration of war is impossible because you couldn't get it, and yet there has to be something, some barricade -- some effort to barricade against this sweeping -- this movement of Marxism from Cuba and the Soviet Union. Every Administration think it's a danger to the future of this country. I happen to agree. Some people may not. I happen to agree that it is a danger.

So, how do you do it? Well, then you get into the trouble. You go into the twilight zone. You do CIA covert operations. Of course, they're not covert.

CLINE: It's easy to see the disadvantages of covert

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action. It is not in keeping with our national traditions of openness and morality. But there is no other good substitute for helping a people who are fighting, presumably, for principles we agree with, a more democratic government than the Sandinistas are offering in Nicaragua and less interference by the Sandinistas from Nicaragua in El Salvador. Those are good causes. And if you don't do it with military force, you have to do it with covert force. What we're facing is a covert warfare from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

POVICH: You disagree with Harry. The CIA can conduct a covert operation successfully.

CLINE: Of course it can.

ROSITZKE: It hasn't in the last ten years, that I know of.

Let me make one point, though, which is another matter.

EVANS: What about Nicaragua?

ROSITZKE: What covert operation?

EVANS: An operation that goes, quote, covert, unquote. It's been operating...

ROSITZKE: I'm sorry. No operation that has been kept -- that has kept the President's hands secret.

EVANS: Well, how would you know?

ROSITZKE: Because every operation -- well, every large operation. Let's put it that way.

EVANS: There has been no clandestine CIA operation in the last five years?

[Confusion of voices]

POVICH:

Successfully.

ROSITZKE: Maury, there's one thing I think that's been missed which I think is worth looking at over and beyond the moral, the legal, the political, the anti-Marxist. To what extent is this particular operation likely to succeed in its goals? Now, there have been plenty of analysis whereas you start supporting invaders of a country, you then support an enormous security and patriotic reaction. So that in many ways, I think right now we are giving the Sandinistas the chance to really tighten up the regime, to get a hell of a lot of support, including from Europe.

POVICH: But the goal is, at the least, to open up the regime, to elections...

ROSITZKE: And we're doing the exact opposite right now.

POVICH: Ray, you think so?

CLINE: No. I don't agree with that. I think that you have to have a combination of carrot and stick in all these matters. We can offer that if the Sandinistas do open up, then everything's different. But for the moment, they have not opened up anything. The only thing they're scared of is those thousands of Contras who thought that it was going to be a democratic revolution, found that they were completely, lock, stock and barrel, in the hands of Castro and the Soviet Union.

POVICH: Don, do you see on the Hill an attitude by a significant number, a majority -- not majority, a significant number of people on the Hill that maybe we'd better just give this all up. I mean this is just...

OBERDORFER: Well, let's not -- it's sort of been forgotten, but the House of Representatives last August voted to stop it. So you already had the House on record as in opposition, under the leadership of Mr. Boland of Massachusetts. And the whole House voted we want to cut this off. And instead, they wanted to, basically, do an interdiction to, in a sense, build a fence around Nicaragua.

POVICH: Can the Administration, through covert activities, operate without the consent of Congress? Is it possible?

OBERDORFER: They cannot operate without the money from Congress. That is for sure.

EVANS: There is no way. They cannot.

OBERDORFER: There is no way an Administration can print money.

POVICH: Ray and Harry probably know more than I do whether the CIA budget is scrutinized more today on the Hill than it has been in the past because of those days of the '70s.

ROSITZKE: That isn't the issue. The issue now, I think, is that we are always forced to refer to the Senate and House Intelligence Committee rather than the old eight committees. And therefore, nothing serious can be done without letting them know.

Now, that doesn't mean they've got the right of veto.

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POVICH: Should the President of the United States come out and now talk about Soviet threats, Cuban threats, threats to our national security? Maybe he could shift onto that...

ROSITZKE: Well, he's done a bit of that over the last three years.

CLINE: Listen, Harry, you've been filibustering on turning it over to the Army, which I think is a cop-out. Only the CIA can conduct discreet secret operations which provides arms and money to people who want to fight for purposes we agree in without attributing it to our own government. We were doing that, apparently, for over a year or so. It has now busted out in the press, largely, I think, because of political disagreements in the Congress. It may be that our oversight system won't work. But it is possible to fight these kind of covert operations.

POVICH: Isn't it that, though? Can not the President say, "Okay. Now I'm going to tell you the real reason we're there. We're there because if we weren't there, Cuba would build a Soviet Marxist state right there in Nicaragua, and it would spread to El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica"?

EVANS: Let me say that with that stump speech, Povich ought to be running the White House NSC staff. And I mean that quite seriously. Because this is the dilemma that the President faces. His political advisers, coming into an election, do not want to present him in the guise of a latter-day Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun. And that looks like, and it is, an invitation to possible use of American force in Nicaragua.

And, of course, what you've just said, the counterargument is even more important, that this is happening, these inroads are being made and we have to resist it.

He should make that speech, and I think he'd carry the American people with him.

POVICH: Would he really, Don, carry the American people, or would he have some problems with that?

OBERFORFER: Well, the American people's reaction --Reagan has made a very similar speech, not about the Contras but about Central America, and he's made it repeatedly, to a joint session of Congress, in press conferences, and you name it, saying this is vital to our national security.

The American people's reaction is on two points. They agree, every poll shows, that it's vital to our national security. And by an equally overwhelming majority, they do not want

the United States involved in that situation militarily. And they want to stay out of there even though they know it's vital.

CLINE: So, the answer is covert operations. There is no other answer. You either quit or you conduct these covert operations, hopefully with more secrecy and more discretion than we have in the past.

POVICH: Could you not mute all the criticism, Ray, if you could have a significant victory somewhere, you could see the Sandinistas begin to lose a bit, I mean their grip? You don't ever see that. That's the problem with covert operations, because the results are so murky.

CLINE: That would help.

But I agree with you, Maury, that really the rationale of the just war, of what we're doing there being in the interest of our value system and our politics and being the direct result of an attempt to resist Cuban and Soviet infiltration, that's the answer that will get the public aware of what it's all about.

POVICH: But, Harry, you say that the covert operation cannot bring that about.

ROSITZKE: I'll put it this way: It's no longer covert. The Congress and the public are against it. And to this point, no one has ever assessed the likelihood that the Contras would stop arms going to Salvador, which is the only purpose I know of.

POVICH: Thank you, all, very much.